

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Thanksgiving Proclamation

GEORGE WASHINGTON

Page | 1

*After the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day is our most observed national holiday. The tradition harks back to the colonists of Plymouth Plantation, Massachusetts, who, after their first harvest, held a celebratory feast in the fall of 1621—a three-day celebration in which local Native American chiefs and tribesmen participated. But the first national Thanksgiving, authorized by the federal government, took place in 1789, the first year of George Washington’s presidency. President Washington issued this proclamation recognizing November 26 as “a day of public thanksgiving and prayer.”**

What, according to Washington’s proclamation, are the blessings for which the earliest citizens of the United States should have been grateful? What list of blessings would a modern-day proclamation include? Can the giving of thanks be commanded—should it be commanded—by governmental authority? In the eighteenth century, thanksgiving days were observed by prayer and fasting; do today’s ritual feasting and drinking alter in any way the intended purpose of the holiday? How does Thanksgiving Day matter to your identity as an American citizen?

By the President of the United States of America. A Proclamation.

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor, and Whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me “to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.”

* *The initiative for this proclamation came from the House of Representatives, but support was hardly unanimous. Some representatives objected that such imitations of European practices would make a mockery of genuine expressions of prayer and thanksgiving, while others objected that expressions of gratitude are private matters that the federal government has no business mandating. But a majority favoring a presidential proclamation prevailed.*

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th. day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be. That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks, for his kind care and protection of the People of this country previous to their becoming a Nation, for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his providence, which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war, for the great degree of tranquillity, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed, for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted, for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us.

Page | 2

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions, to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually, to render our national government a blessing to all the People, by constantly being a government of wise, just and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed, to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shown kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord. To promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the encrease of science among them and Us, and generally to grant unto all Mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best.